



Eckart Woertz

Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB

The modern Olympic Games were launched in 1896 after a hiatus of 1600 years. A reinvented tradition of an ancient ritual deprived of its original religious connotations and filled with modern aspirations of nation-building and aristocratic ideas of character formation. The brand expanded with the first Winter Olympics in 1924 in Chamonix, the first Paralympics in 1960 in Rome and the first Youth Olympics for children aged between 14 and 18 in 2010 in Singapore.

While they were meant to celebrate athletics and the brotherhood of humankind, politics have surrounded the modern Olympics since their inception: nation-states in Europe competed aggressively with each other in the age of imperialism and latecomers like Russia and Japan tried to step into the game.

If the Olympics were an international meeting place with the idea of bringing people together peacefully, they were also used to celebrate a nation's success and showcase ideological worldviews. The Soviet Union abstained from participating until 1952 as it deemed the games "bourgeois" and organised a competing international sport event, the Spartakiads, instead. The Berlin Olympics in 1936 marked a watershed moment in terms of politicisation. Originally awarded to a beleaguered democratic German government in 1931, the Nazis went on to instrumentalise the Olympics to broadcast their ideology of racial superiority and at the same time alleviate international concerns about their expansionist intentions.

Much of the modern iconography surrounding the Olympics was born at that time. The torch relay of the Olympic flame was first introduced and embedded in a bombastic ritual; Leni Riefenstahl pioneered the suggestive use of iconographic imagery in her documentary *Olympia*; and the Games were broadcasted via television for the first time, albeit only to a local audience. With the introduction of satellite transmission in 1964 and colour TV in 1968 this "eventification" of the Olympics received a further push and paved the way for its commercialisation in the 1980s.

The Nazis' view of racial superiority received a dent when Jesse Owens won four gold medals, prompting Hitler to refuse to meet him as he

did not want to be seen shaking hands with a black man. The Berlin Olympics also saw discussions in the US about a possible boycott because of the persecution of Jews in Germany, which had taken a turn for the worse with the Nuremberg laws of 1935. But the boycott initiative proved unsuccessful. Avery Brundage, later President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), was prominent among its opponents.

The games of 1940 and 1944 were cancelled as a result of World War II. Afterwards the politicisation of the Olympics continued as they developed into an ideological frontline of the Cold War. In 1956 the games in Melbourne were boycotted for three different motivations: some European powers abstained in protest against the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956; Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt protested against the Suez Crisis; and China the fact that Taiwan was allowed to compete as the "Republic of China", violating its one-China policy. Many African states boycotted the games in 1976 in protest against apartheid policies in South Africa and Rhodesia. Finally, in 1980 the Western world boycotted the games in Moscow. The Soviet Union and its allies reciprocated with a boycott of the following Olympics in Los Angeles in 1984.

In recent history, boycotts have been unsuccessfully suggested of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 in protest at China's human rights record and Tibet policy, and then again of the Sochi Winter Olympics of 2014 to protest against Russian involvement in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the suppression of human rights and LGBT activists in the country.

Terrorists have targeted the Olympics to capitalise on the global media attention that they attract. During the games in Munich in 1972 a Palestinian terror commando killed 11 members of the Israeli team and a bomb planted by a right-wing terrorist killed one person and injured many others during the games in Atlanta in 1996.

Athletes have also used the Olympics as a platform for conveying political messages. At the Olympics in Mexico City in 1968 the US 200-metre sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos famously lifted their fists in a Black Power salute when standing on the victory podium. Similarly, a Czechoslovakian athlete protested against the occupation of her country by Soviet forces in the same year during the award ceremony. Politics also loom large in the efforts of Iran and other Middle Eastern countries to avoid competition with Israeli athletes.

Gender debates have been another aspect of Olympic politics. Women were allowed to compete as early as 1900, but by as late as 1992, 35 nations still fielded men-only teams. By 2010 only Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei remained in this group. And after international pressure and threats of exclusion from the games, they also sent female athletes in 2012. Other conflicts around the Olympics have included the disregard for rights of native populations and the misappropriation of their cultural symbols.

Nowadays, the most prevalent political discussions surrounding the Olympics pertain to bribery and the exorbitant costs for host cities.

Under the presidency of Avery Brundage (1952-1972) the IOC resisted corporate sponsorship and insisted on an ethos of amateurism in the Olympics that was increasingly questioned. The amateurism requirements were largely dropped during the 1970s, except for boxing and wrestling. During the presidency of Juan Antonio Samaranch (1980-2001) an unprecedented drive towards commercialisation set in. The summer games in Los Angeles in 1984 marked a new high in terms of television deals and sponsorship.

While the financial inflows offered new opportunities to organisers and athletes, they also brought with them allegations of graft and complaints about the opaque procedures of awarding hosting rights. In 1998 several IOC members had to resign after being accused of receiving bribes to award the 2002 Winter Olympics to Salt Lake City. Similar accusations have been made about the 2012 summer Olympics in London and Turin's bid for the 2006 Winter Olympics.

Citizens of host cities and potential candidates increasingly question the exorbitant costs of infrastructure that often lies idle after the end of large sporting events. In Brazil people protested against the widespread corruption surrounding the construction deals for the 2014 FIFA World Cup for football and the Rio Olympics of 2016. Popular referendums in Hamburg and Munich even voted down the two cities' candidacies for the 2024 summer and 2022 winter games, respectively.

The allure of showcasing a country's status and prestige as an accomplished emerging market or rebounding former superpower played an important role in the Olympic bids of Beijing, Rio and Sochi. In developed countries that have hosted the vast majority of past Olympics the appetite to undertake the associated investments is less pronounced these days. Calls for downsized and more sustainable Olympics and fairer burden-sharing between the organising IOC and the host cities are widespread. Future Olympics may increasingly be held in aspiring countries of the emerging world, but even their interest could wane in the light of reduced growth dynamics, lower oil prices and calls for more accountability. It seems that the future politics of the Olympics will be less about geopolitics or lofty declarations of ambitions and ideals than about a more mundane reality: It's the economy, stupid!

